



A PLUM ROLE

STACK talks silliness and scary mice with Keira Knightley and the co-director of *The Nutcracker and the Four Realms*, Lasse Hallström. Words Gill Pringle

Fifteen years ago, Keira Knightley featured in one of the most beloved Christmas movies of all time, *Love Actually*.

"I don't often offer something for Christmas, but every fifteen years I'll go, 'Oh there's another one.' So *Nutcracker* is my Christmas season gift," Knightley tells *STACK* when we meet in West Hollywood to discuss her role as the delicious Sugar Plum in *The Nutcracker* and *The Four Realms*.

But Lasse Hallström and Joe Johnston's frothy confection is not the *Nutcracker* of bygone years with images of a wooden toy soldier, holiday décor, dancing flowers and a little girl terrorised by furry mice.

E.T.A. Hoffmann's original 1816 story, *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King*, inspired spectacular stage adaptations that have charmed audiences for generations; this new, epic, big screen adventure features Knightley, Helen Mirren and Morgan Freeman, and introduces the gorgeous Mackenzie Foy as the science-savvy young heroine, Clara.

"The story has changed a lot

throughout the course of history," says Hallström. "Alexandre Dumas' version was less scary, and later became a ballet featuring music by Tchaikovsky. The ballet is unique with each staging, evolving within the minds of those creating it. We've done the same thing, but we're adding to the story."

Growing up in the London suburbs, Knightley vividly recalls pilgrimages to see *Nutcracker* Christmas specials.

"The first time I saw it I was three years old and was completely terrified of the mice and hid under my seat. Second time, I didn't really like the Sugar Plum Fairy. It was all about the Mouse King and I wanted to be the mice that I'd been terrified of three years before. My mum

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got me a sword and I got to play the Mouse King a lot, apparently. By the time I saw it a third time, I was nine, and loved everything about it," says the radiant actress, who is barely recognisable beneath her Sugar Plum make-up, and who has adopted a girlish, high-pitched voice for her role.

Fast forward from those childhood years to present day, and Knightley has been wed five years to musician James Righton, and is now a mother herself, to three-year-old daughter Edie.

"I still think my daughter is too young to see it. I think the mice would absolutely terrify her," she says. "I tried the voice out on a couple of six- or seven-year-olds when

I was playing in the sandpit with my daughter, and they all laughed. So I thought, well, that's the target audience. They all laughed, so that should be all right.

"Other than that, I asked myself: What else do we know about the Sugar Plum Fairy? She's sugary and she's sweet, so I wanted my voice to be a little bit sugary and sweet. I just made it up, really."

But, most of all, it was an opportunity for the *Bend It Like Beckham* and *Pirates of the Caribbean* star to have fun after a series of more dramatic roles in *The Imitation Game*, *Everest* and *Colette*.

"I really wanted to do this because it was a chance to just be very silly, whereas a lot of the work I do is quite serious and subtle. So, with this, I was like, we'll banish subtlety and just be really, really silly. And my Sugar Plum is pretty silly, so I think I achieved that."

DID YOU KNOW?

The music was adapted in part from Tchaikovsky's *The Nutcracker Suite* from 1892 by composer James Newton Howard, updating the original and adding new tracks as well.

• *The Nutcracker and the Four Realms* is out on Mar 6